

1994

Connections

A ROAD MAP TO CANADA'S CAPITAL



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Conventional Wisdom

Metropolitan Ottawa is a world-class convention destination

As the seat of Canada's federal government, the Metropolitan Ottawa region has the distinction of playing host to countless dignitaries and high-profile visitors. It has translated this experience into a standard of excellence in service that carries down to all its political and business functions.

"A convention held in the nation's capital is more than a business meeting; it is a unique experience and a special event," said Ken Lambert, vice-president of marketing for the Ottawa Tourism and Convention Authority. Lambert and his staff work year-round planning, organizing and co-ordinating conferences and meetings to ensure their ultimate success.

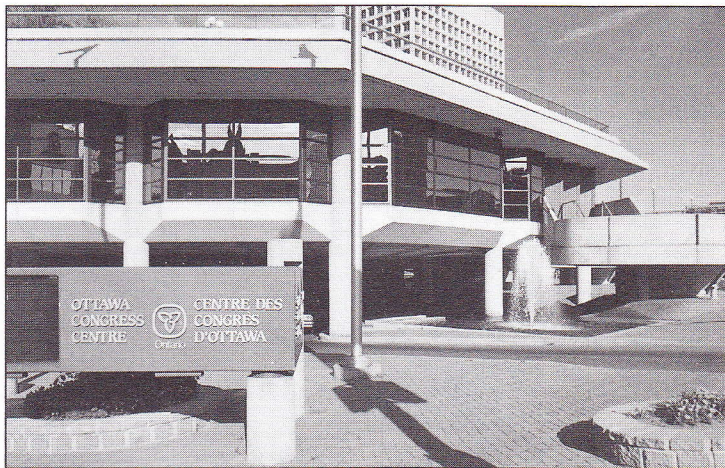
"The services our department provides in convention planning range from cross-border and customs arrangements to guest speakers to baby-sitting," he said.

With the help of the OTCA, the region is carving itself a unique niche in the marketplace. People are realizing that Ottawa is more than a pretty city, or just a place to do business — it has set itself apart in a select class of destinations that combine both these aspects.

One element that makes Ottawa distinct is its position as the nation's capital. Most businesses operating in Canada realize that at some point they will deal with the federal government. Holding a conference or meeting in the capital can give them access to the decision-makers and power-brokers they will need to contact later on.

"A conference in Ottawa means access to quality speakers, leaders in specific fields of business and industry, and access to the real decision-makers in federal and high-level provincial positions," said Lambert.

But the region is not sitting



Located in the heart of downtown, the Ottawa Congress Centre is a state-of-the-art convention facility.

back and relying on its political connections to satisfy business travellers. Lambert and his staff work hard to ensure every event planned in their jurisdiction is an easy and hassle-free one.

The OTCA operates a toll-free number in Canada and the U.S. (1-800-363-4465) through which convention planners can make inquiries and all arrangements from room reservations, to pre- and post-conference tours, to special food requirements.

"It's one-stop shopping for all your convention needs," said Lambert.

While the region doesn't have the amount of meeting and convention space available in some larger markets, it has been successful by being very focused on the types of events it pursues, says David Hamilton, general manager of the Ottawa Congress Centre.

These marketing efforts concentrate on attracting business from fields with an established presence in the region, most notably high tech, environmental services and bioscience. One way this is done is by creating links with the local chapters of national and international organizations so they can champion Ottawa as their

next convention destination.

"We, as an organization marketing conventions on behalf of the capital region, are having success attracting the medical and high-tech sectors due to the abundance of research and technical facilities available to the conference planner," said Lambert.

Of course, the region can handle the bigger events as well.

"Seventy-five per cent of association meetings and conventions in Canada could be held at the Congress Centre in conjunction with the hotels," said Hamilton.

More attention is being paid to attracting convention business from the United States. US Air now flies three daily flights between Ottawa and the US Air hub in Pittsburgh, which has helped by improving air access between Metropolitan Ottawa and the U.S. market.

"As U.S. air links improve, the U.S. convention market will become a more important market," said Lambert.

The OTCA has also increased its U.S. presence by hiring The Hyland Group, a firm based in Chicago and Washington, to do some destination marketing for Ottawa south of the 49th parallel.

The region has three main facilities to offer for larger conventions: the Congress Centre and Lansdowne Park in Ottawa, and the Palais des Congrès in Hull.

But Lambert notes that many of the hotels in the downtown and the suburbs have their own meeting facilities suitable for small and medium-sized conventions.

In all, there are between 8,000 and 8,500 quality hotel rooms and suites in the region, about 4,000 of which are right in downtown Ottawa.

Pierre Normandin, general co-ordinator of the tourism and convention bureau in the City of Hull, says "the convention side is working well." Meeting activity has increased from 32 events five years ago to 83 events in 1993.

Normandin says the whole region has benefitted from closer co-operation by the six municipalities in marketing the area in the past two years.

Another advantage the capital region enjoys is the variety of activities it can offer travellers after the business portion of a trip wraps up. There are plenty of cultural and recreational opportunities for those who want to play tourist. The region's geographic position — a two-hour drive from Montreal and four hours from Toronto — also makes it a great starting point for a pre- or post-conference tour.

"Aside from promoting our basic convention services to the delegate, we're offering a whole host of extended stay and pre-convention packages that provide the delegate with an opportunity to experience Ottawa's unique attractions while in town for business," said Lambert.

"When they get here, there are enough things to do to keep them busy," added Hamilton. ▲